

8 Ways to Help Your Kids Stress 'Better'



Imagine this: You're a ninth-grade math teacher. You sit at your desk a few days before the school year begins, staring at the blank screen on your laptop -- you're nervous. You wanted to use this time to polish a humorous story on Albert Einstein for your new Algebra I students. Instead, you're writing a speech for the first all-school assembly on a topic outside your expertise: stress management.

Earlier that day, the principal anointed you head of the school's wellness committee, a team thrown together to deal with student stress levels that are "far too high." "We need to build a more positive climate," he explained. "You're relatable, students might listen to what you have to say."

You're not sure what you're going to talk about. You turn to your friend Google and stumble upon some shocking information: "Children who grow up in stressful environments generally find it harder to concentrate, harder to sit still, harder to rebound from disappointments, and harder to follow directions... and that has a direct effect on their performance in school." - Paul Tough, author of [How Children Succeed](#)

"If you're chronically stressed, all sorts of aspects of brain function are impaired, including, at an extreme, making it harder for some neurons to survive neurological insults. Also, neurons in the parts of the brain relating to learning, memory and judgment don't function as well under stress." - [Robert Sapolsky](#), Stanford University professor of psychology

"Stress is a top health concern for U.S. teens between ninth and twelfth grade; psychologists report that if children don't learn better ways to manage that stress now, it could have serious long-term health implications." - [American Psychological Association](#)

You're floored by what you've learned. Your speech almost types itself. The next day, you begin your talk. "Did anyone know that stress is the number one health threat in the United States, according to the [World Health Organization](#)?" POW! "Did anyone know that stress is [linked to](#)

[six leading causes of death](#), including cancer, heart disease, liver disease, accidents, lung ailments and suicide?" BOOM!

You fill up 10 minutes with statistic after shocking statistic and then give yourself a mental pat on the back. The student body is now aware of the horrible ramifications of stress and will certainly make managing it a top priority.

The principal comes to you the following morning and explains that stress levels have skyrocketed! Parents are complaining about visible anxiety symptoms in their kids -- some couldn't sleep the night before. You're baffled. You were just stating the facts... what did you do wrong?

Nothing. Well, nothing obvious, at least. You approached the issue in much the same way that the multi-billion-dollar stress management industry does. You told the story of stress as shaped by science, news and popular culture. Here's the narrative in a nutshell: stress is bad, very bad. Then you prescribed a typical remedy of focusing on the negative effects of stress.

Unfortunately, the underlying story of stress is skewed, and so is the remedy. In fact, another body of research reveals that stress can actually enhance performance and well-being. Yes, there is something known as "good" stress. And research shows that making people aware of good stress is a more powerful antidote to its ills than jarring them with statistics.

As parents, teachers, and concerned citizens, we want to take on the epidemic of childhood stress. We want to arm our children with tools to cope with challenges and increase their well-being. But, let us pause and recalibrate our approach. There is a more holistic story we can convey: not all stress is bad. By understanding this, children avoid taking on the impossible mission of eliminating stress completely (and then feeling miserable when they can't do it).

I propose we shift our goal from asking kids to stress less, to instead helping them stress better. Here are eight ideas to do just that.

1. Stop Highlighting the Negative Consequences of Stress

It's our natural instinct to make children aware that they are potentially hurting themselves. But focusing solely on the harm caused by stress has two drawbacks. First, it indicates to kids that stress is bad in an absolute sense, which is simply untrue. Second, combating stress using fear tactics can create even more stress. It stands to reason that thoughts like "Oh no, I'm stressed, and stress is so bad," are going to exacerbate the child's worries. In other words, stress itself is stressful. And the research confirms this.

Recent [studies](#) by Yale and Harvard researchers reveal that corporate trainers who focused on the negative ramifications of stress increase stress in trainees. While this research was conducted on a business population, let's extrapolate that the effect on kids might be the same. To stress better, children should understand the reality: a certain amount of stress is okay; it can even be good for you.

2. Introduce the Evolutionary Purpose of Stress

Kids of all ages love to know that stress is part of human design. Think about our ancestors who went out hunting and gathering food for their families. When attacked by a saber-toothed cat, chemicals were pumped into the body to help fight the predator or runaway. This evolutionary reaction to danger is known as the stress response -- it's a survival mechanism. In modern times, we don't typically need to flee from predators, but the stress response still has a purpose. A certain amount of stress can help us marshal the resources necessary to reach a goal. Studies even demonstrate that as stress increases, so too can performance.

3. Explore Two Different Types of Stress

There are two main types of stress: positive and negative. Positive stress even has a fancy scientific name: eustress. Most kids have experienced eustress. Ask them to think of a time when their heart was racing but there was no immediate threat or fear. Maybe it was while riding a roller coaster, watching a scary movie or going on a first date. That feeling is good stress!

Eustress can help boost motivation, focus and energy; create a feeling of excitement; and improve performance and decision making. It is generally short-term in nature. By contrast, negative stress, known as distress (or what we commonly just refer to as "stress"), can cause anxiety or concern, is often outside our coping capacities, can decrease performance and lead to mental and physical problems, and may be short- or long-term in nature. Drawing a graph of the different types of stress on a continuum can really bring the point home.



(Photo credit: www.GoZen.com)

4. Dig into the Researched Benefits of Stress

Lend these ideas credibility by citing recent science. Here's a snapshot of some studies related to the benefits of stress:

- **Stress can help the immune system.** In one [study](#) out of the Stanford University School of Medicine, patients who demonstrated higher short-term stress before knee surgery recovered twice as fast as those who were not as stressed.
- **Stress can improve memory and learning.** According to neuroscientist [Connor Liston](#) out of Cornell, the stress hormone cortisol, in short bursts, can increase the brain's openness to learning. In other studies, [Michael Gass](#), Chair of the Kinesiology Department at the University of New Hampshire, has found that those who take physical risks like bungee jumping can process information far faster than control groups.
- **Stress can improve decision-making.** A [study](#) conducted by Charles Morgan of Yale Medical School showed soldiers in a mock prisoner-of-war camp secrete a particular amino acid contributing to much higher cognitive functioning and better decision-making. Morgan has conducted several like studies with similar results.

5. Help Cultivate a Positive Stress Mindset

One of the simplest yet most powerful ways to stress better is to start with the right mindset. In a recent [study](#), researchers out of Harvard and Yale conducted an experiment on two groups of stressed-out investment bankers. The first group viewed a video about how stress is debilitating. The second group viewed a video about how stress enhances the body and brain. What happened? The second group -- primed with the mindset that stress is good -- felt more productive and energetic. The group also reported less fatigue and fewer headaches and backaches associated with distress. The results of this study are significant: thinking about stress as "good" or performance-enhancing can work to your advantage.

For kids, this research can be applied immediately. For example, during test time, a pounding heart can be reframed by saying, "Hey, a little stress is actually helping me on this test--my body's giving me a little burst of energy and extra focus to get through this."

6. Encourage Contingency Planning

The object of stressing better is not for kids to live in a fantasy land where they never encounter issues that cause real distress. Challenges will arise and distress may follow, but instead of falling into a downward spiral of negativity, stressing better means being prepared by creating contingency plans. When the body goes into flight-or-fight mode during distress, it can be hard to think clearly. Having a back-up plan can get kids through it. So, how is it done, exactly? Let's borrow a technique from goal-setting researchers.

Interesting [studies](#) on goal-setting show that you're more likely to stay on course toward a goal by using a technique called MCII (mental contrasting and implementation intentions, if you're

interested in the long-form name). With this method, you first visualize your end goal (e.g., getting a "B" or higher on the next science test), and then you envision obstacles that might prevent you from getting there (e.g., missing study group, feeling nervous). Next, create a plan to overcome the obstacles before they even happen. Do this with "if... then" statements such as the following: If I miss study group this week, then I'll ask the teacher for a private tutoring lesson; and if I feel nervous on test day, then I'll do a breathing exercise to calm myself down.

7. Exemplify How Distress Can Lead to Growth

Sally Walker was a survivor of an airline crash that killed 83 people. She said, "When I got home, the sky was brighter, I paid attention to the texture of the sidewalks. It was like being in a movie... Now, everything is a gift."

In his memoir *No Such Thing as a Bad Day*, Hamilton Jordan noted, "After my first cancer, even the smallest joys in life took on special meaning -- watching a beautiful sunset, a hug from my child, a laugh with Dorothy. That feeling has not diminished with time."

What Sally and Hamilton were referring to is the idea that what doesn't kill you can literally make you stronger -- and the studies support this. Kids may be familiar with the term post-traumatic stress, but there is recent research out of the University of North Carolina on a phenomena called [post-traumatic growth](#) (PTG). PTG is the positive changes resulting from a major life crisis (or serious distress).

Researchers studied survivors of severe accidents such as brain injury and paralysis, people who have gone through divorce and even former prisoners of war. In all these situations, some come out stronger than before. PTG results in their feeling more connected with their friends and family, more resilient, and more grateful. Researchers found that those who tend to experience PTG usually approach difficulty rather than avoiding it; they are more open to change.

In our effort to stress better, let's teach children that when they face challenges, it's important to embrace their emotions rather than run away from them. When in a situation of distress, children can reference the examples above or a personal example highlighting where distress has led to positive change. These are reminders that something good -- even great -- can come from stressful times.

8. Teach the Art of Self-Compassion

Ask your child to imagine themselves in this scenario: You're swamped with homework over the weekend, but somehow you finish it all and you're pretty happy with it. Monday morning, you're in such a rush, you leave your book bag at home and there's no way for you to get it. You see your best friend before your first class at school and tell them what happened. Your friend says, "Wow, you left all your homework at home? That sucks! You should really feel bad. Your teachers might mark your grades down for turning in late assignments. I'd be stressed out if I were you--I'm glad I'm not in your shoes."

Most of us would probably dump a best friend like that, and with good reason. But here's the thing, if it's not OK for your closest pals to speak to you that way, why is it OK for you to speak that way to yourself? When something happens that creates distress in your life, chiding yourself is not an effective way of feeling better. In fact, according to [Kristen Neff](#), a researcher specializing in self-compassion, being kind to yourself is a far more effective way of alleviating stress. To foster self-compassion, try a letter writing exercise. Write a letter to yourself in the voice of your real best friend. What would your best friend say to you when you're stressed out? Now speak to yourself in that same voice. Stressing better means learning how to be your own best friend.

Learn more about Renee's programs for anxiety relief and well-being for kids at www.gozen.com and www.gostrengths.com